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SUBJECT: Peace process update: Tiger-Muslim talks said to be constructive; IDP returns up; Cricket in Jaffna

Refs: (A) FBIS Reston Va DTG 020552Z Jun 02

- (B) Colombo 1584
- (C) Colombo 1371

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Charge d'Affaires.
Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) This update of Sri Lanka's peace process reviews the following:

-- Tamil Tiger spokesman and Muslim leader reportedly hold constructive meeting in London

-- GSL official meets with Tigers on development-related issues

-- Recent incident in Jaffna pits students against security forces

-- In sign of confidence in peace process, returns of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) continue upward trend

-- The flavor of the peace process: Famous Sri Lankan cricket player gets warm welcome in Jaffna

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London Talks reportedly constructive
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[1](#)2. (C) The September 3 meeting between Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) spokesman Anton Balasingham and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress leader Rauf Hakeem was reportedly constructive. The talks took place in London with Norway's facilitation. Tomas Stangeland, polchief of the Norwegian Embassy, told us that based on what he had picked up the meeting was a cordial one. He confirmed that the two sides had discussed the nature of Muslim representation at the face-to-face talks scheduled to kickoff on September 16 in Thailand. The LTTE agreed that Hakeem could participate in the first round of talks on the GSL team and at subsequent rounds as leader of a separate Muslim team.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: With the London meeting seeming to have gone in a positive direction, LTTE-Muslim ties may be on an upswing. The LTTE helped set a positive mood for the talks when it recently moved several hardline, anti-Muslim cadre out of their jobs in the east. Regarding the Muslim role in talks, it is still not clear how the Balasingham-Hakeem understanding will work out. GSL contacts have been dubious about the notion of a separate Muslim role, worried that it will make the talks even more tangled and complex. End Comment.

GSL-LTTE meet on development-related issues

[1](#)4. (SBU) In another important meeting involving the Tigers, Bradman Weerakoon, the secretary to the PM, met Thamil Chelvam, the LTTE's political chief, on September 1. Jehan Perera, the head of a local think-tank, told us that he had heard that Weerakoon had used the meeting to probe the Tigers on what sort of humanitarian assistance they needed in the areas they control in the north and east. The discussion reportedly focused on education and health, he remarked.

[1](#)5. (SBU) According to press reports, Weerakoon, who holds the GSL portfolio for north and east relief issues, also visited a LTTE-run demining operation and promised the Tigers that the government would do what it could to assist the LTTE in this area. (Note: Demining in LTTE-controlled areas has been a hot topic of late: At an August 29 roundtable meeting hosted by the GSL for donors, J. Maheswaran, the head of the pro-LTTE Tamil Rehabilitation Organization -- "TRO," stressed that international financial assistance was needed for such demining. TRO, however, wanted local groups -- such as itself -- to receive the funding and not international

groups, which TRO felt would only waste it. In his across-the-table response, the Ambassador underscored that international expertise was important and the international community would be more willing to fund demining if its experts remained involved. FYI:

Maheswaran was recently named a member of the LTTE's negotiating team for the Thailand talks. End Note.)

16. (C) Comment: Weerakoon's meeting with the LTTE seems to have provided a chance for both sides to do an initial scrub of issues that will be discussed at the face-to-face talks slated to begin later this month. Milinda Moragoda, a key GSL minister on peace process issues, has told us that this round of talks would largely focus on development-related issues. Stangeland of the Norwegian Embassy also told us that the Weerakoon meeting was significant in that it was held without GoN facilitation. This indicates growing trust between the two sides, he noted. End Comment.

Incident in Jaffna

17. (SBU) A large group of Tamil grade school students tried to overrun an Army post in the town of Point Pedro in Jaffna on September 2. Several people were reportedly lightly injured in scuffles before the police took control of the situation. A number of bunkers and other military positions were also damaged. The students were apparently protesting the lack of access by citizens to the Army-controlled site. In reaction to the incident, the government has temporally closed two schools in the Point Pedro area. The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission continues to look into what took place, urging that both sides act with restraint.

18. (C) Comment: Point Pedro is known to be full of LTTE supporters (it is near Tiger leader Prabhakaran's hometown) and sources believe that the LTTE instigated the incident. The LTTE's apparent motivation was to pressure the government into moving out of military bases in the area. The group has bitterly complained that military sites in the north and east are too extensive and should be dramatically reduced in size. End Comment.

IDP Returns Spike Up

19. (SBU) UNHCR reports that IDP returns have increased in the past several weeks. According to its figures, 127,000 IDPs have returned to sites in the north and east since the beginning of the year. This is an increase in the July total of 103,000. (Note: There are an estimated 700,000 IDPs left in Sri Lanka.)

110. (SBU) Comment: The IDP returns are a solid sign of confidence in the peace process. The UNHCR has noted, for example, that returns spiked right after the GSL and LTTE agreed to a date certain for face-to-face talks late last month. End Comment.

Famous Cricket Player visits Jaffna

111. (U) Muttiah Muralitharan, a world-class cricket player, and two other members of Sri Lanka's national team, visited Jaffna town on August 31. Muralitharan and his teammates participated in a cricket match along with local players. A huge crowd turned out for the match, mainly to see Muralitharan, one of the world's best bowlers. LTTE cadre present for the occasion warmly welcomed Muralitharan, who as a Tamil who made it big is a folk hero of sorts in Jaffna.

112. (SBU) Comment: Muralitharan's highly publicized visit was another example of the huge expansion in people-to-people ties between northern and southern Sri Lanka that has taken place during the ongoing ceasefire. The growth of such ties -- in addition to progress made on political, ceasefire-related issues -- has played a crucial role in buoying the public's confidence in the peace process. (Note: Other examples of these people-to-people ties include: the "peace" train linking Colombo with sites to its north; reciprocal visits of students and business delegations; the opening of religious pilgrimage sites, etc.) End Comment.

113. (U) Minimize considered.
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